OFFSITE MEETING, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 29, 1987.
by pdl.
(opinions and attributions are my own)

Attendees: Joel, Chris, Mike, Gabby, Jon, Dave L., Steve, Brian

Jon's "agenda":

SOME POSSIBLE TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Where is the market going? (Where has it gone?)
- How many eggs in the I.F. basket?
- What do we do about I.F.?
    - Change collaborator philosophy? ("Name" authors? Licenses?)
    - Outside developers vs. inside developers
    - Genres we haven't tapped into?
    - Any other technological enhancements we should be doing?
    - Proper mix of small changes, big changes, no changes
- Non-I.F.
    - Do we do non-I.F. in-house or outside?
    - How do we go about judging outside possibilities?

--Categories--

We started by discussing the categories entertainment software falls into, with side-trips into such questions as "Is Portal interactive fiction?" The categories were:

Arcade games (Pacman, Airheart, etc.)
Role-playing games (Rogue, Wizardry, etc.)
Sports games (Mean 18, Championship Football, etc.)
Simulations (Flight Simulator, Gato, etc.)
Strategy games (Ogre, Eastern Front, etc.)
Board games (Shanghai, Fooblitzky, etc.)
Interactive fiction (our stuff, etc.)
Miscellaneous (Little Computer People, etc.)

Needless to say, there is a lot of fuzziness here. Is Arctic Fox a Simulation, an Arcade game, or a Strategy game? Is Portal I.F.? Is Time Bandits an Arcade game, or I.F., or what?

There was fairly general agreement that these categories have pretty much been with us since the beginning, and that what happens is that every few years, one of them gets "revitalized" and is the leading category for a while. There was also pretty general agreement that it is usually technology that does the revitalizing (either hardware or software). Lately, it seems that graphics is the technology that's doing it.

There was a great deal of discussion about defining what it is we do.

For example, do we just do I.F.? Do we do anything that has an English parser in it? Do we have to have puzzles? Do we have to have stories? If you do a point-and-click interface (like Deja Vu) is it still "what we do"?

The most popular formulation seemed to be that we do "Interactive Storytelling," which was fuzzy enough that it could hold a lot of different kinds of products, but understandable enough that anyone out in the world could figure it out.

This has implications for what kinds of products we might do, and what submissions we immediately return.

We beat the subject of Portal into the ground. Brian and I contended that it isn't I.F. (in fact, it's barely interactive), just a "novel" way of presenting a fairly traditional story. Some (Jon?) disagreed.

--Technology--

Some people in the market seem to believe that I.F. technology, particularly ours, hasn't advanced in years. They don't notice the small improvements in the parser and substrate, probably because to a casual observer, our newest games look a lot like our first ones.

[Apparently, Personal Computing is doing a piece on new stuff, and said they weren't including anything of ours (when asked) because it's "old hat."]

Some ideas for changing this opinion:

* Graphics title screens.
* "Illuminated" text adventures (as XZIP will permit).
* Sound.
* Friendlier parser (knows about common "first-time" mistakes).
* Better demos (a demo mode, or a demo with speech recognition and speech synthesis for output).

There was a fair amount of discussion about whether it is worth doing any kind of graphics unless it is "the best." Is it worthwhile merely equalling the level of graphics in The Pawn? I think the consensus was that doing good graphics (such as an "illuminated" adventure with Pawn-quality graphics) was better than doing nothing.

A friendlier parser that might make it possible to learn how to play without reading the manual was proposed. It was pointed out that we do this already (to some extent) in games such as Seastalker and Wishbringer. Might be nice to do even better, though.

The consensus was that these things should not all be introduced at once (waiting until they've all been designed and implemented), but rather

one thing at a time, whenever we have a game that wants to use them. Of course, given our manpower shortage, we can hardly do it any other way.

[I made a pitch for a more-unlimited game system, possibly based on MU instead of ZIP. Brian is already running out of table space in his game, Amy's game is too big and no even in Beta yet, all our EZIP games have had to be cut, and Bureaucracy had to become EZIP instead of LZIP.]

--The Market--

There was a lot of discussion of what the market is. Do we think there is any realistic chance of doing "mass-market" stuff? Reading and typing make us a minority taste immediately. What if you don't have to read and/or type? Can you do a good I.F. game with a point-and-click interface? Deja Vu has one approach, Labyrinth another.

What makes our games enjoyable? Lots of different things were mentioned: Puzzles, story, humor, exploration, etc.

I proposed that a major thing is satisfying one's curiousity. Seeing new responses, getting the exciting response when you solve a puzzle, etc.

--New Hardware--

There is a Nintendo game machine out there that has 256K of RAM and uses 256K ROM cartridges. On the other hand, it doesn't have a keyboard. On the other other hand, they've sold a fair number, and it might be good practice for the CDI machines.

The CDI machine introduction date has slipped to Jan '89 (at CES). CDI doesn't have a keyboard either.

Can you do a good point-and-click story game? Brian thinks so, but is vague on the specifics. The Tom Snyder cartoon game and some game-like audio things proposed for CDI may give some clues.

Mike would love to see something with voice recognition in it, for all three people in that market. On the other hand, something like that might make a good demo.

--Pricing--

Mike expressed the opinion that lowering prices doesn't increase sales all that much. He even suggested that we ought to consider a $50 price, as that wouldn't reduce sales much. We've sold about 7000 of the $15 games through Call Center, which certainly isn't bad, but...

Our dealers and distributors are confused by the various price changes.

--Collaborating--

We used to say we'd only do "real collaborations," where the other party did significant work, and not licenses. Is this still true? Bureaucracy violated it (not by choice), we can't be sure how much work Clavell will do on Shogun, and who knows what will happen with Restaurant?

Mike contended that one purpose of getting big names (Stephen King was used sort of generically here) is to get buyers who are interested in that name enough to follow it. Some fraction of these people will interested enough to try other games, even if the name they are fans of isn't involved. Obviously, some names will be better for this purpose than others. Stephen King has been hurt because so many adaptations of his work have been bad. Other people, such as Vanna White (another generic name) wouldn't be perceived as contributing much, even by their fans, and are too ephemeral anyway. There seemed to be some sentiment that with a big name, the product could be an original rather than an adaptation (Bureaucracy vs. Hitchhikers?).

There was a fair amount of excitement (from Brian, for one) about "collaborating" with an illustrator, such as Edward Gorey or even Doctor Seuss.

There was also some sentiment that we should pursue certain potential collaborators, rather than hoping they'd come to us. No names were mentioned, however, and the usual caveat about having an interested imp was caveated.

--Genres--

We talked about genres we haven't done. The usual ones came up again: Best-sellers, Historicals, Thrillers, XXX-rated, etc. The usual mumblings about mysteries were mumbled.

One new one came up, which was Jokes. (A side-trip was made into about a zillion horrific dead-baby jokes, elephant jokes, "Mommy, Mommy" jokes, etc.) The idea was that you could do what Jeff is doing in Wordplay, but go even further, and essentially have a collection of jokes and riddles.

--Submissions--

How do we feel about submissions these days? Joel is not worried about being sued if we develop a game that someone thinks is a ripoff of a submission. (Actually, it's Smith McKeithen who isn't worried). It was suggested that Jon have anyone he gives an outside submission to initial it, so we know who's seen it. Submissions that are well developed would be given more consideration that mere "ideas."

Once we are working entirely on micros we can license our development

system to outside developers (like EA does).

--Product Mix--

It was proposed (sort of as a confirmation of what we already seem to be doing) that if we shoot for nine products a year, we do:

3 traditional I.F. (Stationfall, Lurking Horror, etc.)
3 "enhanced" I.F. (Beyond Zorkquest IV, Illuminated text, etc.)
3 misc. (non-I.F. stories, outside collaborators, etc.)

There was some discussion of whether that's too few traditional games, or too many games of all sorts. The question of whether Lurking Horror and Stationfall will hurt each other's sales was brought up. Once we find out we'll have more data on how many games the market will support.

It might also be nice to have a game "in the bank," to fill in for a delayed Bureaucracy, for example. I got the impression that Mike would rather release anything finished. We may end up with a game in the bank anyway (the Challenge game, if we end up distributing Guild of Thieves).

Doing fewer games a year would be cheaper in terms of overhead (fewer Imps needed, fewer testers, fewer everything) but more dangerous because then if one of your (say) three games a year bombs, you are up a creek. If you do nine games a year, a bomb or two can be absorbed; you're unhappy, but still in business.